

The Effectiveness of Formative Assessment in Closing the Attainment Gap in Secondary Schools

Education Studies & Pedagogy

Difficulty	Intermediate	Recommended Length	10,000 – 12,000 words
Keywords	formative assessment, attainment gap, secondary education, disadvantaged pupils, feedback, England	Academic Support	AssignProSolution.com

Introduction

The attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils — those eligible for free school meals — and their peers has persisted stubbornly in England despite significant policy attention and funding. Formative assessment is frequently cited as one of the highest-impact, lowest-cost interventions available to schools. This dissertation examines what the evidence actually shows about whether it can make a meaningful dent in that gap — and why implementation so often falls short of theory.

Background and Context

Black and Wiliam's 1998 review 'Inside the Black Box' made a compelling case for formative assessment as a driver of learning gains, and the Education Endowment Foundation consistently rates feedback as one of the highest-impact interventions in its Teaching and Learning Toolkit. But the research distinguishes between feedback that works and feedback that is merely frequent. Low-quality formative assessment — vague comments, grades without commentary, assessment that does not change teaching — may actually widen gaps by giving disadvantaged pupils less useful information about how to improve.

Key Research Questions

1. Does consistent high-quality formative assessment practice reduce the attainment gap between FSM-eligible and non-FSM pupils in secondary schools?
2. What barriers prevent effective formative assessment implementation in under-resourced schools?
3. How do teacher workload and training affect the quality of formative feedback given to disadvantaged pupils?
4. What does the EEF evidence base show about which specific formative assessment practices produce the largest learning gains?

Suggested Methodology

A mixed-methods case study across three to five secondary schools in England, selected to represent contrasting Ofsted ratings and Pupil Premium allocations. Classroom observation, teacher interviews, and analysis of pupil assessment records (where permitted). Systematic review of EEF-funded intervention studies on formative assessment as the secondary data layer.

Key Theoretical Frameworks

Assessment for Learning Framework — Black & Wiliam (1998)

Zone of Proximal Development — Vygotsky (1978)

Self-Regulated Learning — Zimmerman (2000)

Feedback Theory — Hattie & Timperley (2007)

Common Challenges and How to Address Them

School access is the main practical challenge — DBS checks and university research ethics approvals take time, and headteachers are protective of staff workload. Starting with schools where the research lead or a departmental contact already has an existing relationship cuts the access timeline significantly. Being clear that the research is observational rather than evaluative also reduces gatekeeper resistance.

Conclusion and Next Steps

This is a topic where the gap between what the research says and what happens in classrooms is genuinely interesting and analytically rich. A strong dissertation does not just report that formative assessment is effective — it explains why the gap between evidence and practice persists and what would need to change for implementation to match intention. AssignProSolution.com can support you through every stage of your education dissertation.

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